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RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE IMMEDIATE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YAOUNDE 000358

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SUBJECT: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY PASSES CONTROVERSIAL
CONSTITUTIONAL REVISION BILL

REF: (A) YAOUNDE 346 (B) YAOUNDE

Classified By: Pol/Econ Officer L.Wahid for reasons 1.4 (b & d)

11. (C) Summary: On April 10, the National Assembly overwhelmingly passed a controversial constitutional amendment which, among other things, removes presidential term limits and gives the president immunity from prosecution for acts committed while in office. Opposition parties suggested changes and raised technical issues but in the end none of their proposals were accepted. The main opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) walked out of the session, citing a violation of the standing orders of the National Assembly. With passage of the bill, Cameroonian politics is now more unpredictable. The GRC's sensitivities notwithstanding, we should consider a firm USG response to what is a significant step backward for democracy here. End Summary.

The CPDM Proposed

12. (U) Poloff attended the April 10 parliamentary session, which included participation by Prime Minister Ephraim Inoni, the Special Minister in Charge of Relations with the Parliament, Gregoire Owona, Minister of Foreign Affairs Henri Eyebe Ayissi and many other ministers. The session highlighted the results of an April 7 Constitutional Laws Committee meeting in the National Assembly, in which Owona and Minister of Territorial Affairs Hamadou Marafa Yaya defended constitutional revisions of articles 6, 14, 15, 51, 53 and 67 of the 1996 Constitution (reftel). The committee report argued that limiting the presidential mandate would "impede the people's sovereignty" and that Elections Cameroon (ELECAM), the electoral organ charged with organizing elections, "guaranteed a democratic, transparent and legitimate election." The committee report characterized the 1996 Constitution as a "watered down position of disagreement between the GRC and opposition parties." It endorsed reducing the Constitutional Council's mandate from nine to six years as being consistent with similar institutions in Niger, Cote d'Ivoire and Lebanon. During the April 10 discussion, ruling CPDM party parliamentarians argued that not passing the bill would violate President Paul Biya's "human rights" by limiting his mandate and that pursuing a referendum, as some proposed, would cost money that could be better spent on development. They praised the bill as an example of collaboration between the executive and legislature.

The Opposition Protested

¶3. (SBU) There was mild opposition to the bill. SDF parliamentary leader Dr. Joseph Banadzem raised a technical issue, saying that the bill received in the Chairman's Conference was not the exact bill initially presented to the National Assembly and that it should therefore be sent back to the Conference. Banadzem reminded the floor that the 1996 Constitution resulted from a tripartite agreement, arguing that it could not be amended without a conference or the support of the people. If the majority party voted to proceed with the new bill, the SDF would "not participate in this fraud on the Cameroonian people," he said. After the National Assembly voted against sending the bill back to committee, the SDF walked out of parliament. Opposition leader Jean Jacques Ekindi from the Progressive Movement (MP) implored parliamentarians to remember that they represented the will of the people. The GRC, he added, could technically amend the Constitution through the Parliament; however, While the GRC was within its legal rights to amend the constitution, he said, it was in violation of "the spirit of the law" because he felt the bill did not represent the people's will.

The Bill Passed

¶4. (U) At the end of the day, 157 out of a total of 180 parliamentarians voted for the revision, including all 153 CPDM parliamentarians. Five legislators voted against it and 15 (all the SDF Members of Parliament) abstained. The final bill contains all the revisions proposed by the GRC, as

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detailed reftel. While President Biya now has 15 days to sign the bill into law, he is expected to do so very soon.

Comment

¶5. (C) We and most Cameroonians had not doubt the constitutional bill would be passed once we learned that it had been submitted to parliament on April 4. As indicated in reftel, we do not anticipate a violent reaction, at least in the short term. Our sense is that many, perhaps most, Cameroonians oppose the constitutional change but are resigned to accept it for now. They fear the security forces, especially after the crackdown following riots in February, and most are busy trying to make ends meet. SDF leader John Fru Ndi has publicly denounced passage of the bill, saying Biya has created a "dictatorship" and indicating that his party is considering its next steps (though the SDF is in a weak position to do much). With passage of the bill, Cameroonian politics is now more unpredictable. The GRC obviously hopes to forestall a diplomatic reaction through the Foreign Minister's clumsy outreach efforts (septel). Many Cameroonians appreciate the USG's stance over the past few months opposing the elimination of term limits and they are looking to us to speak out against this latest, significant and unpopular step backwards for democracy.

NELSON